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 KRZYSZTOF-TEODOR TOEPPLITZ

The Films of Wojciech Has

Among the Polish film directors whose names have reached the West, Wojciech Has is relatively little known either to public or critics. To be more exact, he is just beginning to be better known now that the stir caused by Wajda and Munk has begun to subside; the premières outside Poland of *Kanal*, *Ashes and the Diamond*, and *Eroica* are receding into the past, but last year Has's *How to be Loved* captured first prize at the San Francisco Festival.

A growing interest in Has can also be found in the director's own country. Here his films are not considered dazzling like those of Wajda, nor do they strike the audience, as do Munk's, with the aptness of what the director has to say. What is more, right from the outset it has been impossible to fit Has's films into the formula of the "Polish School" constructed by the critics for the period 1956-1958. This idea of a "school" was generally accepted for a time, and became current usage for foreign film critics—especially for critics in the West. But Has does not concern himself with the pathetic, nor very much with the tragedy of history, nor what might be described as the involuted contortions of our national destiny. He is not at all engaged by the problems of heroism, whether of the romantic-positive type favored by Wajda or the sceptic-rationalistic type of Munk. In fact, Has has never made a war film, which could be held to be the "diploma piece" for a Polish film director—rather as in the mediaeval studios a painter had to produce a Madonna and Child before he could be considered a master.

The same sort of difficulty is found with the work of another Polish film director, Jerzy Kawalerowicz, an artist who is also a master of

professionalism. He too keeps well clear of the accepted themes of the Polish School, and critics who try to make a standard interpretation fit his work have more than once come to grief. Nevertheless he has found his own way to success, helped by his exceptionally high standard of craftsmanship.

The case of Has is different, however. Those who want to understand his work well must be capable of reacting not only to film in general, but to a considerably more complex group of impressions, sentiments, and moods, common to film and literature, and in the final analysis to life itself.

Has is a "literary" film director. This is not only a matter of giving priority to the narration of the plot instead of to the form of the film, which may be less important than his particular sensitivity to "literaryness" of mood. Several elements combine to bring out this effect of "literaryness," the principal one being Has's use of dialogue. To a far greater extent than is normal, dialogue serves Has to carry the main burden of telling the story. Another element is the tendency for Has's characters to acquire a certain exoticism, so that they become closer to those of a psychological novel than to the sort of heroes and heroines normally met with on the screen. Finally, literary quotations may even be written at length into the script. Thus in *Farewells* the main characters stand at a bar and hold a conversation by quoting verses from Slowacki at one another. *How to be Loved* ends with a line from Nerval and the engineers in *Gold Dreams* quote verse in the original French—which, one may remark, sounds fairly unusual.

These interpolations are not accidental. Rather they point to the sort of material from

which Has shapes his films, and his wish to catch impressions more of moods than of events or problems. This is essentially a job for poetry rather than drama or film. However in Has's hands it has nothing in common with the false poeticism cultivated in so many films with the help of soft photography, purposely ambiguous montage, discontinuities in the story line, etc., etc. Has's poetry makes his films to a certain extent static in their manner of exposition, giving us shots which may last for five minutes or even longer, action which is frequently held up, and sets which increase in importance accordingly. In this way the director undertakes one of the basic functions of lyric poetry, that is, to "catch the moment," saturate himself in it, and fix it before it can fade.

This short summary of Has's style could give a false impression without some more definite idea of the sort of literature with which he feels he has most in common, and which thanks to him has found its way on to the Polish screen. This is the body of work known as "The Reckoning of the Intelligentsia" (to use the label given it by Marxist critics) which is one of the most fertile and interesting phenomena in Polish writing since the war.

Some of the leading works in this field are the novels of Stanislaw Dygat—amongst others *Good Bye to the Past* filmed by Has and usually known as *Farewells*; and *Lake Constance*, cur-

rently the subject of one of his screenplays but not yet filmed; Kazimierz Brandys' (*How to be Loved*); and Tadeusz Breza. As for the roots of this literature, briefly, it sets out to describe what happens to the educated middle classes when they have to come to terms with the war. And not war as a general experience for the whole of humanity, involving genocide and annihilation, but rather as a sociological phenomenon, the overturning of the apparently stable urban society in Poland.

And so a typical hero of this literature will be a young man brought up in an enlightened middle-class home who even before the war came into conflict with his environment, rebelling from the point of view of the bohemian against its traditional conventions. War destroys the pretences built around themselves by his parents' generation. Their prosperity lies in ruins, their class prejudices appear grotesque. Finally they themselves are helpless in the face of the new circumstances with which history has presented them. They are driven to depend on chance, outdistanced both in coping with life and in making a living by their own servants, people until now looked down on as "not belonging to society."

While for this older generation everything that happens is senseless and disastrous, for the bohemian it is all quite straightforward and only bears out his own predictions. He does

Barbara Kratoftowna
and Zbigniew Cybulski
in
How To Be Loved



not really lose his sentimental attachment to the world that is passing. He knows how to appreciate its charm, he understands its *raison d'être*, but at the same time he can see its ridiculous, anachronistic side. From this arises his scepticism, tart humor and irony, and from this comes also his peculiar attitude of "make-believe life," which is prevalent among Has's heroes.

There are two main aspects to this "make-believe life." The first is a feeling of nostalgic attachment and empathy for the people and manners of the society that has had its day. Now that these people are no longer sure of themselves, no longer grasping or dangerous, they awaken a sort of sympathy in the hero.

The second aspect is a receptiveness to the fresh experiences offered by contacts with the new society. Has's heroes do not take the representatives of this new society very seriously, but they accept them as partners in investigating what further life has to offer.

This very brief survey is enough to give some idea of the no-man's-land in which most of Has's films are set. The fullest portrait of this social border-land is contained in the film *Farewells*, where the structural elements can be made out quite clearly and are almost exactly as described here. However, these same elements can be found in all his films, which together constitute—more than anything else—an incontrovertible study of decadence. The hero of Has's first film, *The Noose*, is after all decadent, a morbid alcoholic. The atmosphere of indolence and decadence hangs over the characters of *One-Room Tenants* (sometimes known as *The Common Room*). People who have been beaten by life keep appearing in *Partings*. Some signs of decadence can be found also in the hero of *How to be Loved*. *Gold Dreams* is the film that has the most constructive message, a story about people who are working on a vast industrial project, people who identify with their work, which provides them with both hope and ambition. But even here the attitude of the engineer contains a suggestion of sceptical bitterness, as a sort of *porte-parole* of the

director. There is also a special shade of "outsider" quality in the behavior of the young man, the vagabond, who is involved with nothing and nobody. He is an up-to-date version of Has's hero, having something in common with the mythology of the Beat Generation. A similar young man appears as the main protagonist in *Partings*, taking advantage of people in a small town cynically, without compunction, and without being touched by their problems.

While dealing with the decadence portrayed by Has in his films, we must make at least two further important points. In the first place we must not confuse it with the "dying fall," with a mood of melancholy regret for things that are past. Has is far from manufacturing tragedy, nor does he concern himself with privileged musings and the pretentiousness that this leads to. As in the literary originals, particularly Dygat, so in Has's films a state of social insecurity is more a matter for irony than for lyricism, and also occasions a peculiar type of sarcastic humor. This humor and irony, approaching people and problems from their lighter, ridiculous, and even grotesque side, provides a built-in compensation for the atmosphere of "make-believe life" in which his heroes are sunk. The characters of *The Common Room*, prewar students all packed into the same lodging, with neither food for the present nor prospects for the future, are continually making fun of their situation. But the one man in the group who takes his predicament seriously, tries to make it measure up to his ambition and throws himself into his life with full conviction, commits suicide at the first set-back. "Make-believe life" entails living at a slight distance from reality, and this distance is created most effectively by irony, towards both the world and oneself.

This approach is not only psychologically appropriate so far as Has's character-drawing is concerned, it is also essential to stop his films from degenerating into melodrama. For in actual fact it is not so difficult to perceive that the situations drawn by Has are very close to melodrama. Only a thin line divides his films from

*Goodbye
to the Past*



the cheap poetics of autumn leaves and the dead embers of burnt-out passion, etc., etc. Also the inclination of Has's heroes—who come from “the right sort of home”—towards romances with dance-hall hostesses (*Farewells*), poor girls from the suburbs (*One-Room Tenants*), and actresses from touring companies (*Gold Dreams*), or to friendship with casual acquaintances found in bars (*The Moose*) could have a flavor not found in the very best sorts of literature, if it were not for this ironical distance. Thanks to this the situations in Has's films are able to develop both artistically and intellectually.

The problem of value in Has's films may give rise to some reservations. Has said once during an interview: “My heroes are not weak creatures, they want to act but they are prevented. They are not stupid. To make some positive contribution to life is difficult, and when we try we find there are plenty of obstacles. To be disciplined and equitable is the best way of consolidating one's position and ‘getting oneself organized.’ And this is exactly what the characters that I bring to the screen want to achieve.”

And so this world that appears decadent on the outside is not so in the moral sense. On the contrary, the search for constructive values is

going on continually, constructive both morally and socially. Still one can hardly say that Has is wedded to one definite moral idea; the answers he gives in his films are various, though not basically contradictory. Quite often one of these answers will be presented through an artist who hopes to reassure himself that his life has not been wasted, by regaining his creative ability as it was at its peak. The drunk, reminiscing in the bar in *The Moose*, recalls with emotion the time when he was “the best saxophonist in the country,” and blames his downfall on the loss of this position. Similar people living on their memories or on the hope that their creative power will return can be found in *Gold Dreams* and *One-Room Tenants*. The hero of *How to be Loved* makes his whole life subordinate to the fact that he has been a first-rate interpreter of *Hamlet*, and when there is no longer any hope of a return to this state, he commits suicide.

The successes that these people talk about and the reassurance that they get from the approval of others are not of course the chief concern in Has's films. The director's attitude can be seen in *How to be Loved*, where the heroine attains success and popular affection just when the love which has given personal

meaning to her life has been lost completely. Success does not in fact go with a feeling of happiness, on the contrary it has a taste of some bitterness and resignation.

So what about love? That answer also appears to be unreal, although the question, of its very nature, must be very general. The motives of love act in opposing directions, no matter how impenetrable they may be in Has's films. Sometimes, as for example in *One-Room Tenants*, love manages to be a comforting gesture; or sometimes, as in *Farewells*, it confirms in some way the crystallization of the hero's attitude. But also very often it has a diffusing effect—it becomes burdensome and importunate as in *The Noose* and *Gold Dreams*. The attitude to love and women in Has's films is yet another occasion for irony. These things seem to be marginal rather than central to the hero's life.

So then it will be closest to the truth to say that the scale of values in Has's films is mainly the business of "getting oneself organized" spoken of by the director himself, and which amounts to achieving some concord between motives and action. Often this state is reached in terms which may be accepted objectively as constructive. The hero of *Farewells* "gets himself organized" when he becomes fully receptive to the new experiences, which the new era will bring him. The engineer in *Gold Dreams*, disappointed in his private life, will feel the same when sacrificing himself to his work. But in *One-Room Tenants* this moment of internal equilibrium is reached when the hero accepts the idea of his own death—death which nobody can believe is necessary for himself. In *The Noose* the point is similarly tragic. In the end it cannot be denied that many of Has's solutions gravitate towards existentialism, although in ways that differ from one another considerably and are never banal.

Against the background of Polish postwar cinema Has has established a distinct personal silhouette. He is not the easiest of directors, but he gives us that part of the truth about present-day Poland which is commonly lacking in more representative work.



Wojciech Has
shooting
Saragossa